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SSI Thought Letter: Vol. 1 Issue 5

Rob Jones 20 min read · Apr 7, 2020

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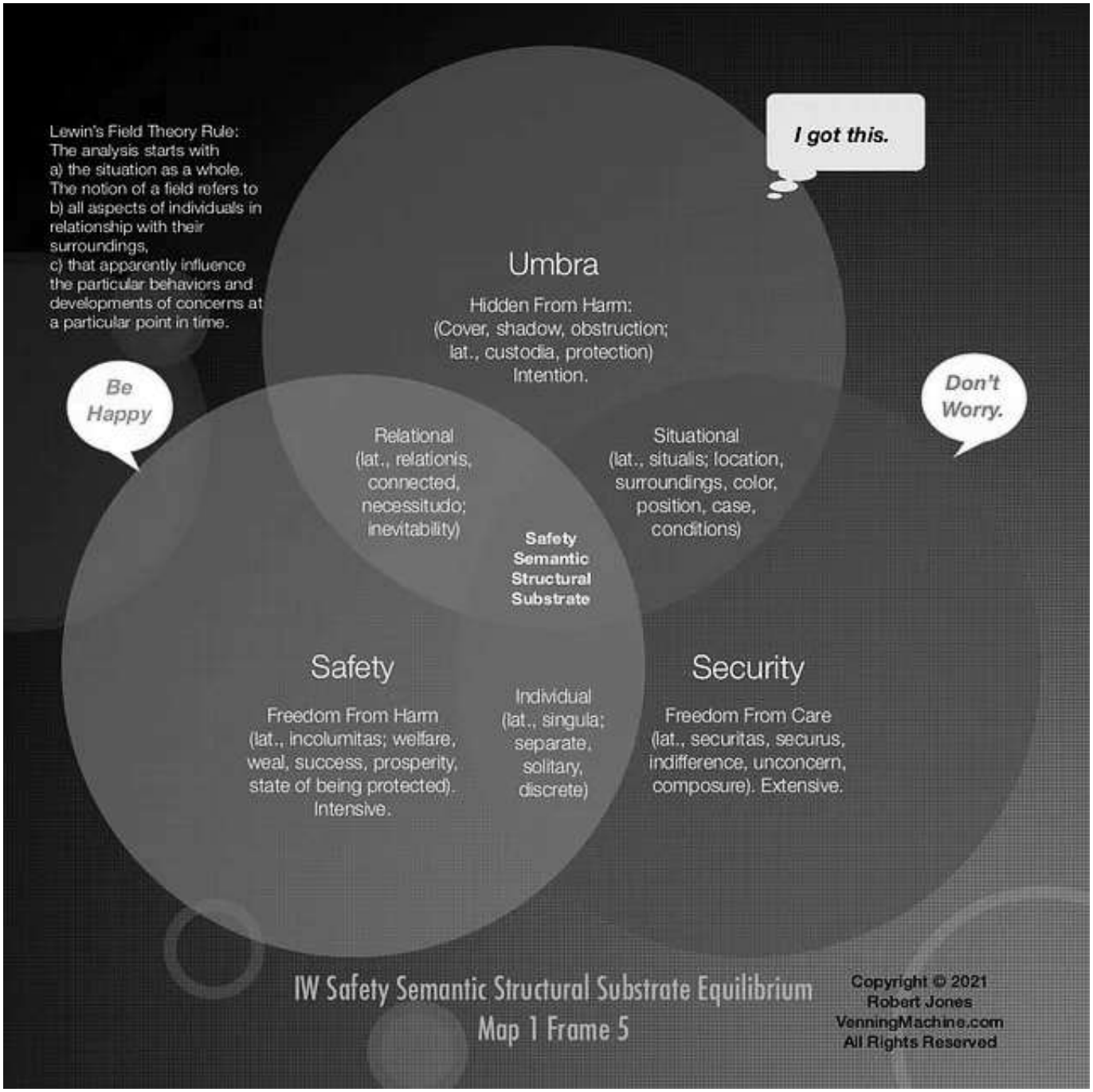
Sociological Safety® Domain: Theoretical Grounding



Trivalent Semantic Unit (TSU) — Safety Molecule©

PROLOGUE: Previous SSI issues have covered the idea of extruding "sociological safety" out of Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs. To some, it may seem a stretch, especially with respect to its "fit" into a broader Safety EcoSystem.

In this issue, we'll consider two things:

First, a brief recap of why **Sociological Safety** should exist as a discrete entity.

Second, two key questions:

1. Does Sociological Safety fit naturally with the way others, including sociologists, see the world?
2. Does Sociological Safety make intuitive sense as a pragmatic frame for nonscientists for application as an approach to safety problems at operational levels?

Why Sociology Relates to Safety

The definition of "safety" is straightforward: "Freedom from harm." It is from the Latin "salvus." Salvus is a Latin adjective meaning "safe." The Sanskrit word that is etymologically related and conceptually similar to the Latin salvus (in the sense of "whole" or "intact") is sarva. So, for most of the recorded (written) human history, safe/safety means "*to be protected from or not exposed to danger or risk; not likely to be harmed or lost.*" It's non-complex.

Sociology focuses on the functions, advancement, and development of human society, examining social structures, institutions, groups, social processes, and social change. Safety is intrinsic to each of them. We are generally familiar with the concept of "social safety" as a state of well-being where individuals feel secure and free from harm. However, it may be perceived more as a function of government than an academic discipline or profession. The connection to the sociological view of safety as *a socially constructed state* isn't as well understood as the connection between psychology and "psychological safety" as a mental state.

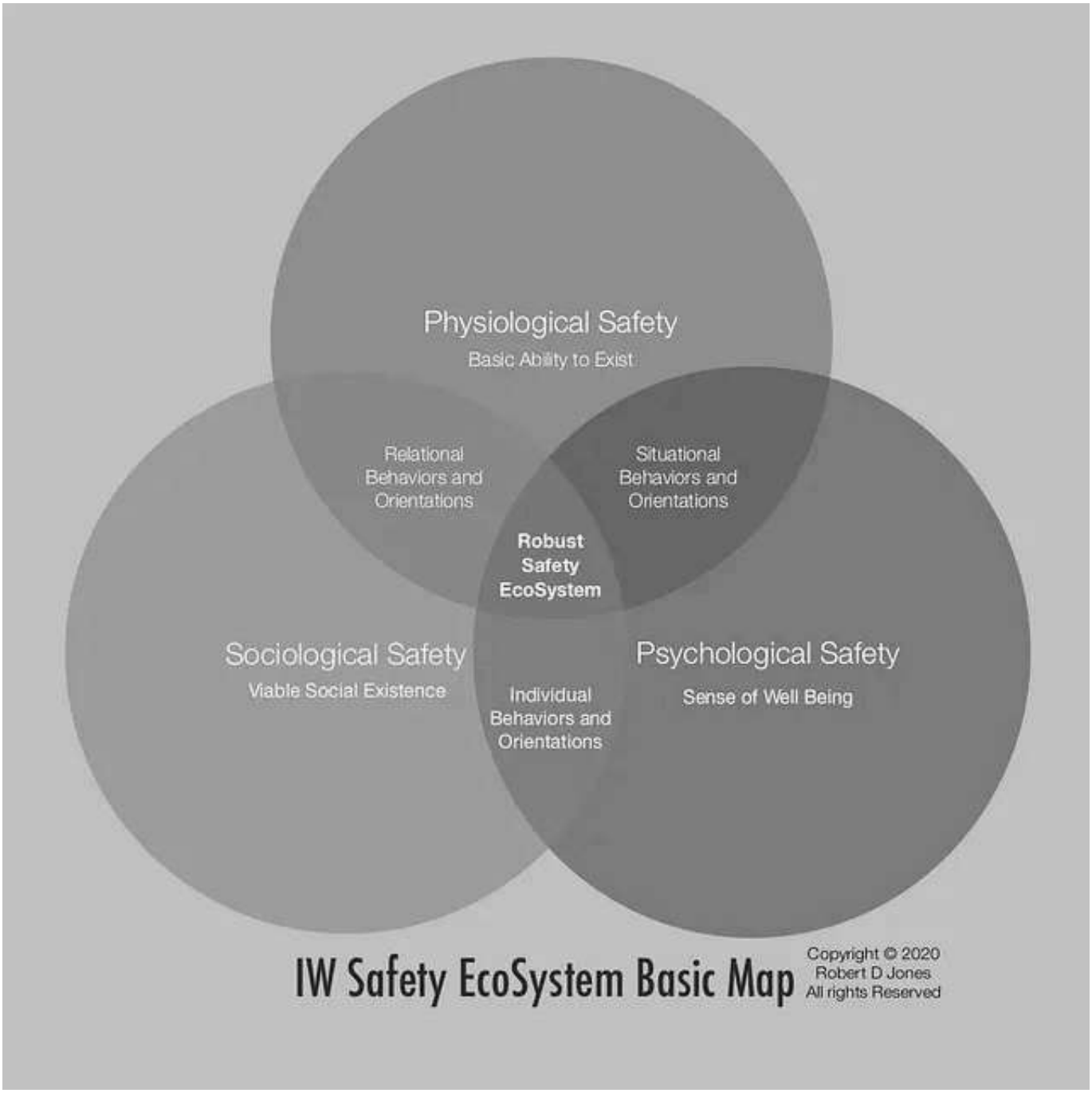


Fig. 1 — IW Sociological Trivalent Safety Base Ecosystem — Venn Cartograph*

Most people seeking some form of psychological safety would intuitively seek out a counselor, psychologist, or psychiatrist. But when individuals or families seek out improved social safety, few would look in the Yellow Pages for a sociologist. Even legislators wouldn't first reach out to sociologists if their constituents called for increased social safety; instead, they would likely lean toward issues like law enforcement, community infrastructure/programs, and social services.

Sociologists approach safety by analyzing underlying social mechanisms and how cultural norms, power dynamics, and systemic issues shape safety. From this viewpoint, a lack of *social* safety isn't just a matter of individual behavior but can also stem from broader societal failures and inequities. Their focus is on causation and on how safety is shaped or constructed by society… or lost.

Psychological safety and physiological safety are established concepts. At the same time, the term "*social*" is attached as a prefix and suffix to "*psycho*" and "*psychology,*" nudging sociology out of its own domain of managing sociological issues at scale. The terminology strategically *brackets colonization*, a pincer move that marginalizes unadulterated sociological analysis, subordinating it to psychological frameworks.

A genuine sociological approach to safety would analyze the level of *institutional structures*, social relationships, power dynamics, and resource distributions to create the conditions within which all safety experiences occur. Sociology provides the big picture, *the linkage to sociology's five major* ***social institutions,*** which collectively and individually stabilize fundamental societal functions. These simultaneously create and manage safety through structural mechanisms that extend far beyond individual psychology and stabilize across generations.

- **The family** establishes primary socialization for safety, transmitting cultural safety norms across generations and creating the foundational social bonds that shape how individuals perceive risk and protection throughout their lives. Stabilizes through primary bonds, identity formation.
- **Education** shapes safety through hierarchical structures, policy frameworks, and institutional cultures that can either systematically

protect or expose students to harm — as seen in how school safety policies, disciplinary systems, and campus cultures create differential safety outcomes that reflect broader social inequities. Stabilizes through knowledge transmission and shared understanding.

- **Religion** provides moral frameworks that define safety obligations, establish community safety norms, and often serve as crucial safety nets during crises, while their organizational structures and authority dynamics can also create vulnerabilities.
- **Government** creates the regulatory and enforcement mechanisms that define societal safety standards, yet these same political structures often produce differential safety outcomes based on social position, race, and class. Stabilizes through law, order, and the predictability of rules.
- **Economy** shapes workplace safety through structural arrangements, labor relations, corporate hierarchies, profit motives, and regulatory capture, influencing safety outcomes in ways that individual psychological interventions cannot address. Stabilizes through meaning, moral order, and existential grounding.

From the sociological perspective, safety failures or risk excess often stem not from individual behavior or psychology, but from how, at the macro level, these institutional structures systematically create, distribute, and manage risk across different social groups; and how the organizational institutions at the meso level (workplaces, schools, hospitals, community groups) translate these broader institutional forces into specific safety cultures, policies, and practices that either amplify or mitigate the safety risks inherent in the macro-level structures. Individual safety attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes at the micro level emerge from the interaction between these integrative institutional influences and personal agency within structurally constrained choices.

This differs significantly from psychological safety (individual perceptions) and psychosocial approaches (the integration of individual psychology with social context). “Sociological Safety” breaks the substitution by refusing both bookend framings and insisting on sociology’s autonomous analytical role in examining how social structures generate safety phenomena.

The practical implications of a distinct *Sociological Safety* domain matter. Why? Solutions that work at the individual psychological level often fail when the underlying *social structures* remain unchanged. Culture, for example, is a social structure frequently implicated in such failures. The failures are not directly attributable to a lack of sociologists engaged in the professional field of risk and safety management. But it isn’t difficult to intuit that expert sociological perspectives could play a significant role in reducing the number and severity of such failures.

It’s about more than reclaiming sociology’s analytical turf. The prospect of a “sociological safety” domain is about establishing a discrete, crystalline sociological perspective on the field of essentially sociological phenomena, rather than treating it as an incidental or collateral sidebar subsumed by psychology. Examining safety as a fundamentally social phenomenon aligns with the scientific view that it is shaped by human interaction, socio-technical dynamics, group dynamics, institutional structures, and societal systems at scale, rather than individual perceptions within social contexts.

Let’s take a moment to give that a comparative sanity check, from a structural standpoint, both intradisciplinarily and inter- or transdisciplinarily.

Intradisciplinary Form

We begin by providing the following tripartite cartograph, examples of specific disciplinary structures as they have existed, interacted, and combined to benefit human society.

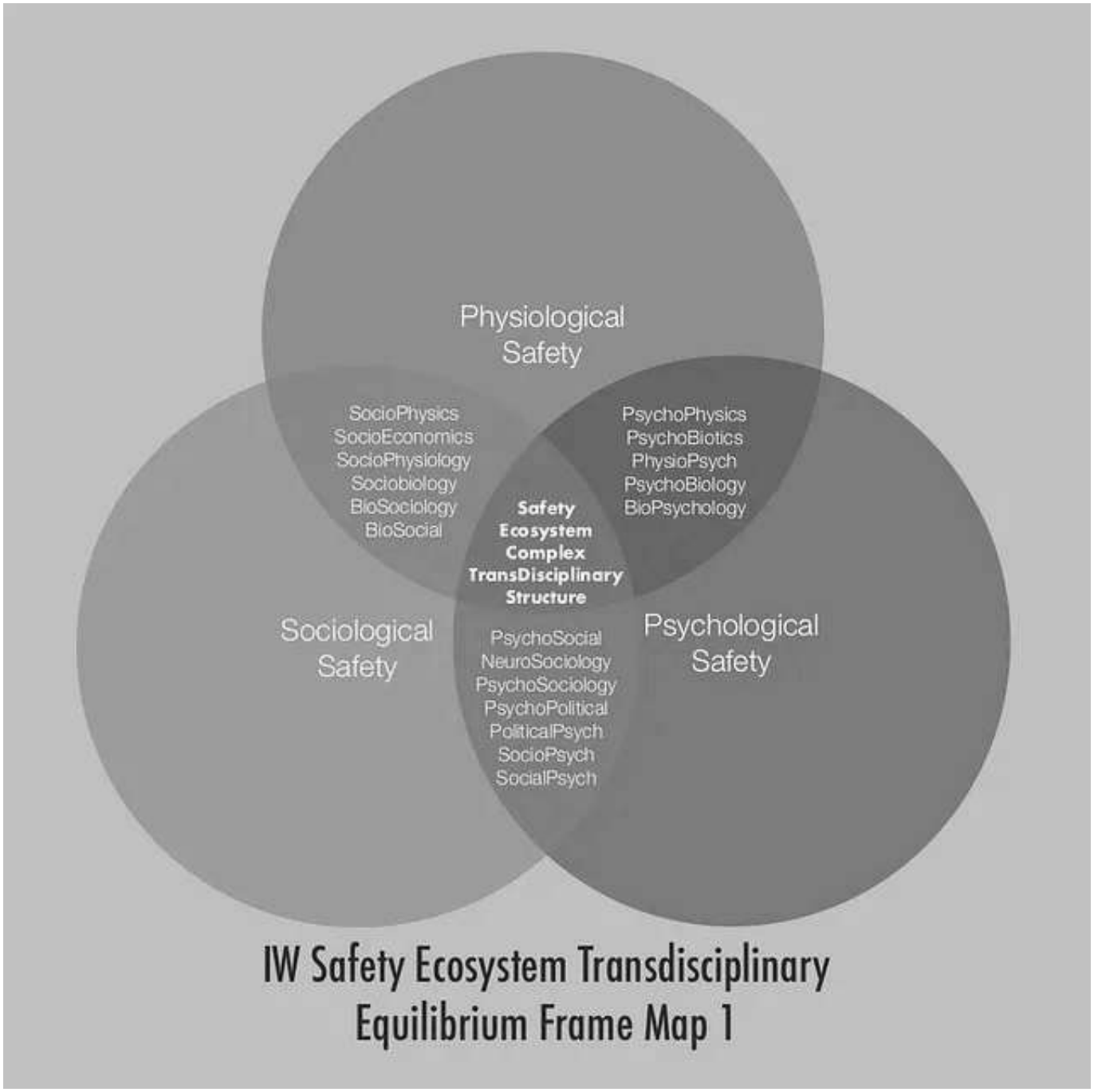


Figure 2 — Transdisciplinary Fields: Making the world a better place.

Each of the transdisciplinary fields is actual, neither surmised nor random combinations of disciplines, for the sake of this writing. Google awaits those

of you who are curious enough to search for all eighteen. (Fig. 2) There may be more, but the point here is that **safety as a science** parallels the intradisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary sciences in its ability to conform to the tripartite form and function. The tripartite domain structure with nexus is harmonious with and mirrors the current model of scientific inquiry. The nexus is a multifaceted fusion of *sociology* with the other two domains, without treating *safety* as something we can move beyond or ascend above once lower-level basic needs are satisfied, nor as something we only need to return to by regressing to lower regions of physiological need, as Maslow's Pyramid does.

Intersection and collaboration aren't the only paths to novel scientific structures. The s*ociological safety* domain pulls slightly in the opposite direction, clarifying the discrete sociological nature of safety, yet in a way that doesn't compromise its identity within the interdisciplinarity or transdisciplinarity.

Rather than being something new, the integrative framing of a discrete "sociological" disciplinary structural element is more of a repeat performance, with good reason.

As early as 1938, Psychologist Edward Chase Tolman explored a structural perspective, the triadic relationship among *"Physiology, psychology, and sociology"* as a coherent disciplinary triad. He argued for a reversal of the hierarchical directionality, with sociology informing psychology and psychology informing physiology, rather than the then-more-typical hierarchy with physiology at the base.

Tolman asserted that *sociological forces* are fundamental to understanding individual psychology, which, in turn, *influences* physiological functioning.

This view aligns with the idea of a Borromean entanglement, in which the fields give rise to "*interfunctional relations between the psychologist's independent variables*," making them mutually dependent rather than ordered in a linear fashion. (Tolman, E. C. (1938). Physiology, psychology, and sociology. *Psychological Review, 45*(3), 228–241 https://doi.org/10.1037/h0060722, PsycInfo Database Record © 2025 APA)

Four decades later, the triadic ***biopsychosocial*** (BPS) model was put forward by psychiatrist George Engel (1977) as an "antidote" to the biomedical paradigm. As psychoanalysis was losing dominance, Engel proposed an "overarching" framework to emphasize the interconnectedness of biological, psychological, and social factors in health and disease, an integrative systems model. "***Biopsychosocial***" resonated and was adopted as a "revolutionary" model in terms of its contribution to science. It grew in acceptance worldwide, its principles embraced by the U.N. WHO agency.

Engel's BPS was framed as a triad of domains and, rather than being integrative, became codified as a three-box checklist or 'three-bucket' structure. BPS exemplifies a category error that has undermined its coherence. Biology is positioned simultaneously as one domain among three equals and as the overarching substrate within which psychology and sociology emerge. This creates logically incompatible levels of analysis, as biology cannot function coherently as both a peer domain and as the encompassing framework.

This structural contradiction has led to persistent criticisms that Engel's model is 'vague, useless, and even incoherent — clinically, scientifically, and philosophically.' (*Bolton D, Gillett G.,* The Biopsychosocial Model of Health and Disease: New Philosophical and Scientific Developments: *'**Biopsychosocial Model 40 years On**,' Cham (CH): Palgrave Pivot; 2019*).

Tolman "regarded psychology as both a biological and a social science." His framing, however, presciently resolved the BPS category error by maintaining the *same level of analysis* across its three domains *as a uniform, congruent disciplinary level.* He considered none of the three independent, though he recognized that they scaled differently; in his model, all three operated interactively and *in parallel,* but with a specific ordinal information flow.

Although his framing was a forgotten precursor to the biopsychosocial discussion, Tolman had, in effect, warned against the very hierarchical reductionism that later undermined Engel's BPS framework. ('*Edward Chace Tolman: 1886–1959,*' Richard S. Crutchfield, The American Journal of Psychology, Vol. 74, №1 (Mar., 1961), pp. 2+135–141 (8 pages): University of Illinois Press)

"I would define physiology as a study of the laws determining the *activities* of muscles and glands; "I would define psychology as a study of the laws determining the *behavior* of whole organisms; "I would define sociology as a study of the laws determining the c*onduct* of groups of organisms."

Tolman's 1938 argument:

- Physiology should not be treated as the "foundation" upon which psychology is built, with sociology a mere overlay.
- Psychology can't be isolated. It is constituted by interfunctional relations with both physiology and sociology.
- Sociology is not a derivative "add-on"; sociological forces are *fundamental* in shaping the individual mind, which then influences physiology.

- Tolman's category congruence anticipated the 3-Ring Borromean nature of the triad in which cutting one ring causes the entire structure to collapse, though he still modeled hierarchy.

Tolman's conceptual congruence was a crucial strategic step because it provided a clear, non-contradictory map of the territory before trying to model the flow of traffic within it. He wrote, "…even within the confines of a single science, such as psychology by itself or physics by itself, the whole can often be said to govern its parts quite as truly as the parts may be said to govern the whole." Tolman's express interest was furthering understanding of "the interrelationships between three successively larger sciences of physiology, psychology, and sociology" as parallelism.

That hinted at Sociologist Anthony Giddens' "structuration theory," which broadly addressed issues of directionality in areas such as social interaction and interdisciplinary work. Giddens recognized that the multidirectional process of interacting structures becomes both the medium and the outcome; that social structures and human actions (agency) are mutually co-created through a continuous cycle of production and reproduction in daily practices.

Interdisciplinary Forms

The formal naming trend and structured study of interdisciplinarity began to emerge in the early 20th century with the formation of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC). The term "transdisciplinarity" was introduced by Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget at a 1970 seminar in Nice, France. The combo specializations stretch across all three major spheres of our day-to-day living, working, and playing. The trend of creating new transdisciplinary and

interdisciplinary specialty fields in pursuit of a viable, “safer” existence for human beings came at a cost to sociology and the safety profession.

The considerations above suggest the legitimacy of existing lines of scientific inquiry and support the need for a coherent tripartite safety model. All three domains’ disciplinary professions are now in hot pursuit of whatever holy grail there may be in each emergent nexus between them.

The fundamental weakness in Maslow’s Pyramid exacerbated the progressive obfuscation of sociology’s academic identity midcentury. Sociology didn’t escape being buried inside the pyramid as an implicit object, and never managed to escape it.

Bringing a “*sociological safety*” domain into the light, then, isn’t a whim. It has precedent, albeit implicit (as in its insinuation in BPS or Maslow), that clearly differentiates sociology-based queries around human needs. This one surgical need in particular (i.e., safety), and related behaviors from its two already well-known and often implicated companion areas of scientific inquiry, is revealed. It is not *uncommon to see physiological (basic) needs and psychological needs mapped to Maslow’s hierarchy pyramid. Sociological needs* are implied in its midrange, but should have been explicitly stated at the very least in *social terms*. Sociological safety excavates sociology from the dark inside of Maslow’s Pyramid.

Image: https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html

Through the recent debunking of the pyramid, the social science disciplines have maintained their discrete identities and integrity. However, over time, the shuffling of the scientific deck led to an almost intractable fusion of "social" with "psycho," creating conceptual drift. Sociology generally came to be viewed as a methodological orientation rather than a distinctly rigorous analytical domain. Everyone does "social analysis" now, as if it were sports color commentary. Specific, in-depth, "sociological analysis" of how social structures generate safety needs and material safety provisions too often ends up being the cloistered labor of sociology's literati.

The typical vertically integrated *safety* theme encompasses *sociological* behaviors, extending their effects to the operational level for practical application in group/organizational safety. Safety is a narrow slice (or strata, as Maslow treated it) in the spectrum of human needs and observable sociological phenomena. It establishes a narrow footing in the discussion of all human needs through the lens of sociological perspectives.

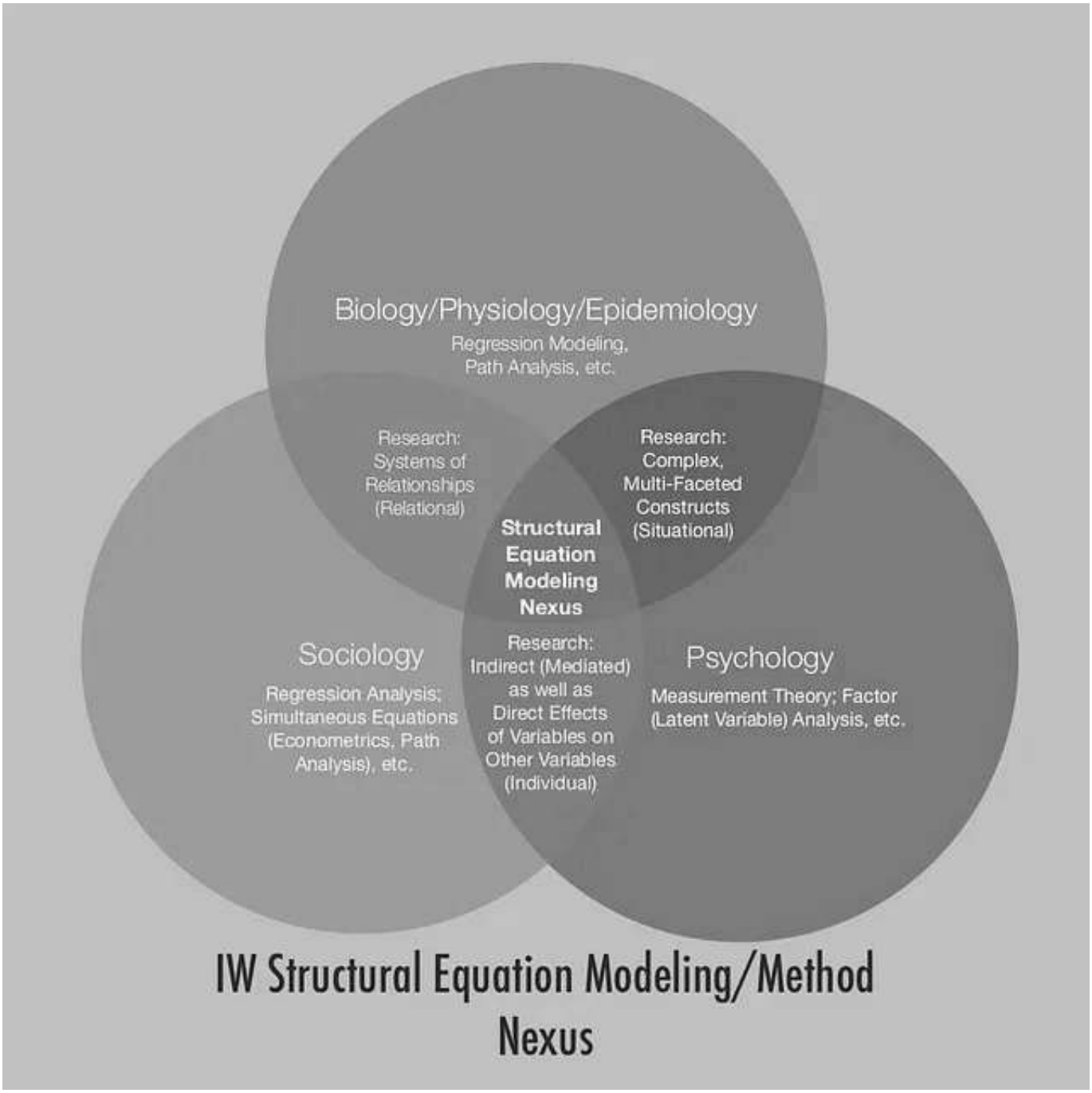


Figure 4— Tripartite Venn Cartograph with SEM Methodological Nexus, incorporating Engels' "Biology" as a moderating variable.

It's appropriate to acknowledge what would logically follow, like framing discussions of human needs in terms of sociological belonging, sociological esteem, and sociological actualization, differentiated from their treatment in the other two domains. It is also obvious, then, why beginning with *safety* is likely an appropriate (and perhaps easy) place to start in any approach to business and organizational social existence. The fundamental quality of

safety (or its absence) in real life is pervasive, eminently observable, and measurable.

Another integrated and dynamic application is situated in the evolutionary statistical and analytical modeling genre, organized around the same tripartite model that includes the primary domains of Physiology, Psychology, and, most particularly, Sociology.

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), for example, is an analytical framework that uses a set of multidisciplinary measurement techniques commonly used across various scientific disciplines. However, there is a dominant focus on multivariate techniques integrated into what might be seen as a 'unified theory' of analysis designed most specifically for sociological research.

Again, the purpose herein isn't to explain SEM in depth. SEM is one methodology, not *the* only applicable methodology. It's depicted here to establish a basis for introducing a discrete *sociological* domain into a unified, multidisciplinary tripartite framework, addressing the expression (modeling) and analysis of specific types of problems beyond the reach of either of the other two disciplines alone.

The fundamental point is that the sociological safety domain itself generates the underlying data structure, the social processes, institutional arrangements, and structural relationships that create the observable phenomena across all these manifestations:

- **Corporeal**: How bodies are differentially exposed to risk,
- **Material**: How resources and hazards are distributed,

- **Observable relational:** How social connections and networks affect safety,
- **Situational:** How contexts shape safety experiences,
- **Individual social:** How structural positions influence personal safety outcomes.

The sociological safety domain doesn't just provide one lens among many. It produces a foundational data reality that underlies all observable safety phenomena. It does this in the same way that physiological health and dysfunction or psychological health and dysfunction manifest. Whether you analyze this data through SEM, ethnography, network analysis, spatial analysis, or other methodologies, we're working with data that emerges from sociological processes.

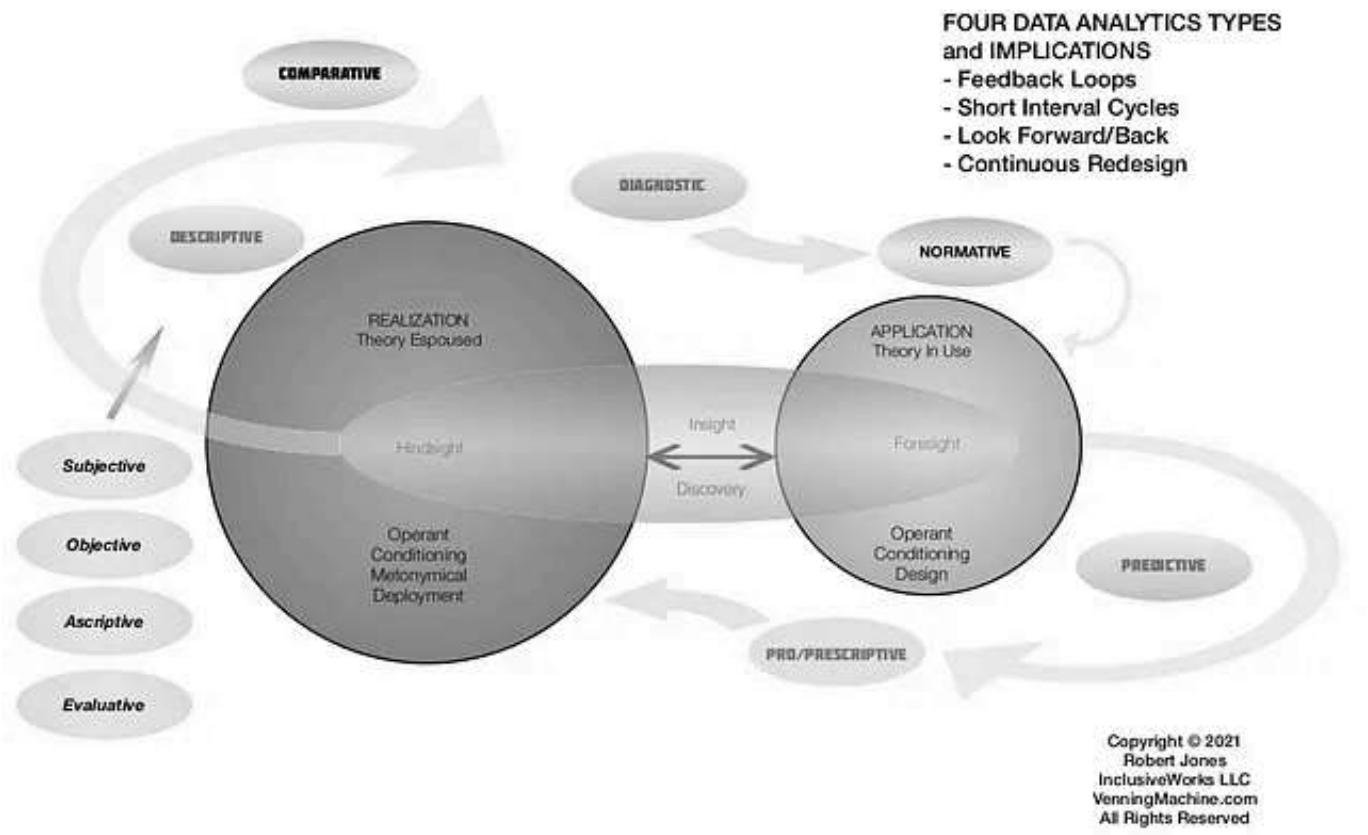


Fig. 5 — Data Analytic Types and Implications: This analytical flexibility demonstrates why sociological safety shouldn't be subsumed under psychological frameworks. It can generate its own rich data structure requiring autonomous analytical approaches.

This means the domains (psychology, physiology, sociology) are complementary perspectives and produce complementary data. The sociological domain doesn't displace or replace psychology. They are co-constitutive and concurrently analytical manifestations of fundamental processes. Individual psychological responses to safety threats, physiological stress responses, and sociological entities, such as organizations and organizational cultures, all emerge from and are shaped by the integrated, mutually operating domains.

It's still first and foremost about framework-independent measures like:

- Actual incident rates
- Response effectiveness timing
- Coordination failure frequency
- Compliance measurement
- System reliability data

Framework independence means that multiple theoretical approaches can be tested against the same objective safety outcomes; validation doesn't depend on accepting a particular theoretical lens. The effectiveness of safety infrastructure can be empirically compared across different organizational theories, and researcher bias is reduced by using external validation criteria.

For example, there is nothing inherently wrong with *anthropological scores* for measures such as communication satisfaction, perceived safety climate, team cohesion ratings, engagement surveys, or cultural assessment. However, sociologists would consider them more relevant (i.e., predictive rather than strictly descriptive) when they can be compared against those directly or indirectly involved in safety incidents and those not involved.

Anthropological or psychological scoring becomes sociologically relevant safety infrastructure when they empirically connect to manifest relationships with material safety performance. The Sociological Safety standard is that psychological and anthropological measures earn their place in safety infrastructure by proving predictive value through comparative analysis. They become sociological safety tools when they reliably predict who will or won't be involved in safety incidents.

This formulation resolves the false dichotomy between subjective and objective measures by making predictive validity the criterion for formal inclusion in sociological safety infrastructure. Psycho-anthropological measures that predict material safety performance become legitimate components of sociological safety systems. Those that don't remain interesting but are collateral to safety infrastructure design.

Therefore, it's not methodological sophistication that necessitates sociological safety analysis; rather, discrete sociological domain processes are necessary to generate a data structure that all safety analysis must ultimately reckon with, regardless of the methodology. This is a fundamental ontological point about the nature of safety phenomena themselves. It highlights the need to identify an existing social construct as a *natural* framework for extracting data, and to place the data and findings within it, operationalizing them.

Coincidentally, E. C. Tolman was a contemporary of Kurt Lewin, both of whom were Gestalt-influenced behaviorists who advanced cognitive psychology by introducing internal mental processes into the study of behavior. Kurt Lewin first presented his concepts of field theory and the "life space" in his 1936 book, *Principles of Topological Psychology.* Tolman, in his 1932 book, "*Purposive Behavior in Animals and Men,*" challenged stimulus-response theory and introduced intervening variables such as cognitive maps.

Linkages of Safety to Lewinian Life Space

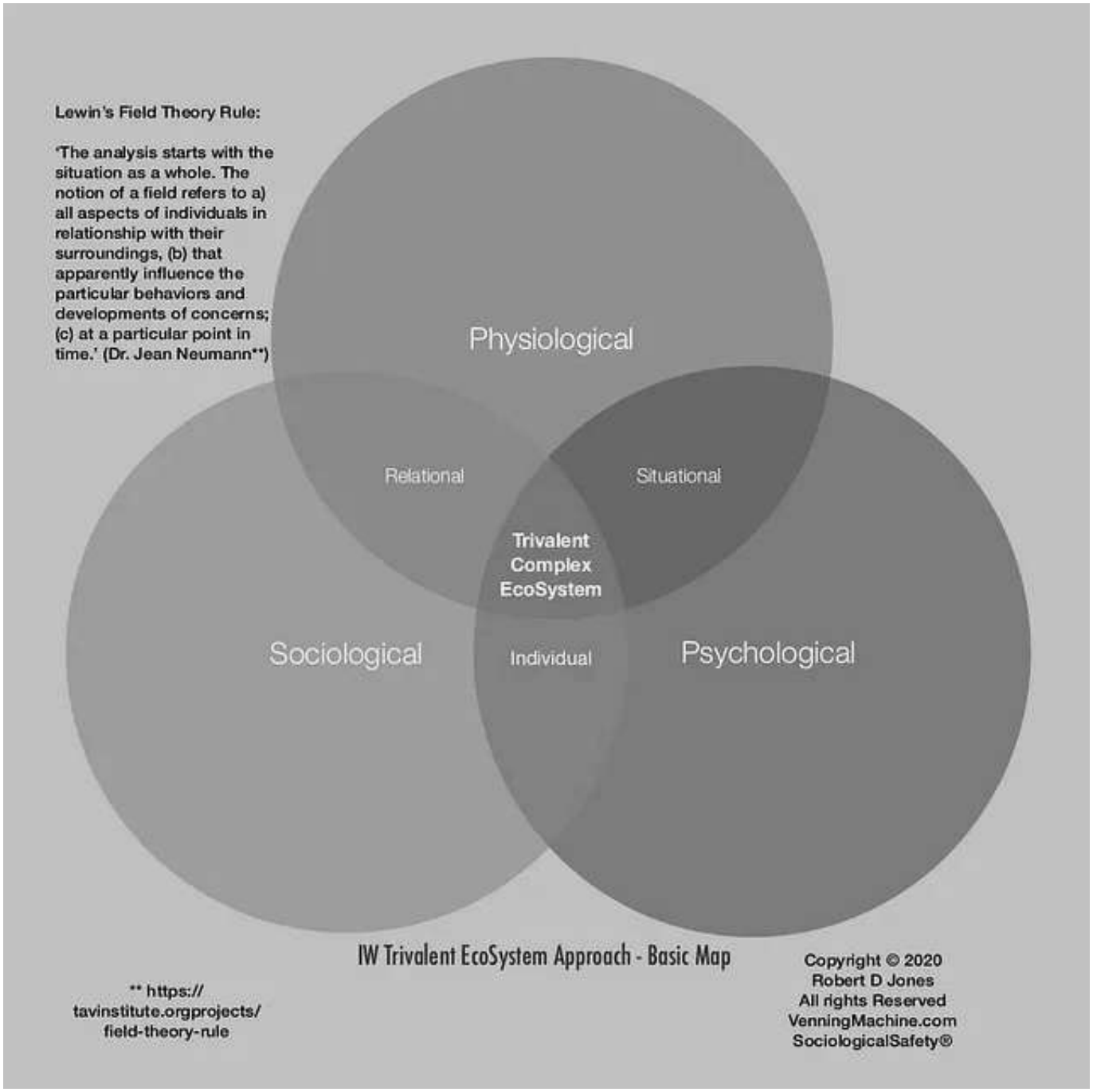


Fig 6. Trivalent Complex Ecosystem: The term "trivalent**" originates from chemistry and general science, referring to a valency of three** or **involving three components.** Lewin's field theory offers the mechanism for operationalizing the interaction between the three domains, moving the model beyond static categorization and into dynamic prediction. Lewin's fundamental equation expresses behavior as a function of the person and the environment: B = f(P, E).

Safety, from a sociological perspective, emanates from and is rooted in the five social institutions, encompassing the full range of entitative social structures, from individual to institutional. (*Entitativity is the degree to which*

a collection of individuals is perceived as a single, unified entity or "group" rather than a mere aggregation of unrelated people.)

The central thread that binds the three Tolman domains together (physiology, psychology, sociology), as reflected in Fig. 4, is the key to operationalizing their integration across the full spectrum of sociological entitativity. The work of Kurt Lewin applies here and is reflected in the Fig. 4's three piscis sections (*think of them as jurisdictional spaces rather than intersections of unions*).

The visualizations (Fig. 2 and 4) depict two of many ways to conceive of multidisciplinary involvement in problem-solving by *including* sociological perspectives. They imply the intrinsic causal loop of social interaction that flows between the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of analysis. They incorporate a sociological perspective that, even as individuals who belong to groups, human behavior is shaped (moderated and mediated) by the very groups to which individuals belong. Social interaction within those groups is thereby affected by factors both endogenous and exogenous to each social group.

Lewin's fundamental equation expresses the core of field theory, expressed narratively in the central configuration shown in Figures 1 and 6, which was written as **B = f(P, E),**

Where:

- **B = Behavior:** The observable actions, responses, or psychological movements of an individual.

- **f = Function of**: Indicates that behavior is determined by the dynamic interaction and interdependence of the Person and the Environment.
- **P = Person**: The individual's internal (psychological) characteristics, including their needs, beliefs, values, abilities, and motivations.
- **E = Environment**: All physical and social external factors influence the individual's behavior at that specific moment.

The Venn cartograph's core (Figures 1 and 4), incorporating the Lewin formula, visually encapsulates how he might have conceptualized the "calculation" of behavior as an emergent property of the dynamic, interconnected forces within an individual's unique psychological field.

The three piscis labels (*Relational, Situational, Individual*) rely on 'Field Theory Rule' as explained in Dr. Jean Neumann's series of articles summarising selected Lewinian principles, the second installment, specifically: "…the notion of 'field' refers to: (a) all aspects of individuals in relationship with their surroundings and conditions; (b) that apparently influence the particular behaviours and developments of concern; (c) at a particular point in time."

	Psychological Field (Perception, Cognition)	Sociological Field (Group Rules, Status)	Physiological Field (Biology, Embodiment)
1. Individual	**Internal Tensions (Vectors):** The magnitude and direction of the drive to reduce internal disequilibrium (needs, cognitive dissonance, emotional states) that *demand* a behavioral response.	**Perceived Social Capital (Status):** The internalized sense of relational power, role privilege, or constraint, acting as a **psychological lever** that enables or suppresses action.	**Biological Attractors (Homeostasis):** The automatic, non-conscious forces pushing the system toward chemical and energy balance (e.g., pain, deep fatigue, high arousal) that dictate the **baseline energy** for all action.
2. Situational	**Valence Gradient (Cognitive Map):** The **flow** of perceived attraction/repulsion across the immediate environment, defining the easiest **paths of least resistance** toward perceived goals or away from threats.	**Structuration Pressure (Formal Rules):** The external, institutionalized rules, laws, or norms that act as **strong barriers or guaranteed pathways**, which are both utilized and *reproduced* by the individual's action.	**Energetic Constraints (Ambient Force):** The continuous environmental loads (e.g., noise, temperature stress, air quality) that siphon off cognitive and physical resources, **nonlinearly** reducing the total capacity for intentional action.
3. Relational	**Interpersonal Force Field (Affective Charge):** The dynamic, momentary tension and emotional draw (or repulsion) created by proximity to specific others, which acts as a **directional amplifier** on motivation.	**Normative Feedback Loop (Practice):** The current group expectations (norms) that exert a collective, *directional* force on the individual, which the individual's behavior simultaneously **reinforces or subtly challenges** (structuration).	**Co-Regulation/Stress Response:** The physiological resonance between individuals (e.g., contagious arousal, calming presence) that **modifies the biological attractor** by raising or lowering the body's internal stress/safety threshold.

Fig. 6.1 — Configured as a standard 3×3, the cellular narrative describes the integrated, dynamic context of field **forces and tensions** that constitute Lewin's "Life Space," in which all cells are interdependent and subject to continuous transformation through the individual's actions and interactions with the environment.

The refined Trivalent Safety Ecosystem framework, as alluded to by Tolman, is enriched by his contemporary's "Field Theory" and Lewinian "Life Space" components at its core. The vesica piscis sections in Fig. 7 are used to represent Field Theory components as crystallized by Neumann, and the Reuleaux central (*triangular*) emergent nexus names the object-subject of primary interest of the Venn cartograph.

The framework provides a succinct, nonlinear heuristic for safety researchers across the three disciplines. It facilitates the formulation of

more integrated research questions that transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries. The Venn cartograph defines the Life Space by using the Venn-like "*intersection*" of the three fundamental **Domains (Fields)**: Physiological, Sociological, and Psychological, as spaces representing the labels' properties, factors, elements, objects, etc., not as strict set-theoretic unions. The nine cells of the Fig. 6 matrix map onto the more dynamic seven discrete regions of the Venn diagram.

Many studies operate at either a micro-level (e.g., neural processing, individual phonetics) or a macro-level (e.g., societal dialects, discourse analysis). Lewin's field theory provides a natural visual and mental bridge between these levels by explicitly linking the individual (P) with the environment (E) in a dynamic system. By categorizing safety facets across Tolman's physiological, psychological, and sociological dimensions, as well as foundational, dynamic, and individual aspects, the triadic framework encourages researchers to consider the many possible multi-level and dynamic interactions.

For example, the framework can guide studies investigating how societal norms (a macro-sociological aspect of E) influence individual neural processing (a micro-physiological aspect of P) during safety-seeking (B) in a specific communicative situation (a dynamic/contextual aspect of E). This approach fosters a deeper understanding of specific complex causal chains and feedback loops within Lewin's life space, enabling a more holistic and ecologically valid study of safety, updated with modern understandings of each of the two psychologists' model components.

Final Thoughts: The Horizontal-Vertical Complement

Does Sociological Safety fit naturally with the way others, including sociologists, see the world?", and "*Does Sociological Safety make intuitive sense as a pragmatic frame for nonscientists for application as an approach to safety problems at operational levels?*"

The sociological domain naturally aligns with how others, including psychologists, sociologists, and safety professionals, perceive the world and formulate theories. The discrete sociological safety domain, situated within the ***Safety EcoSystem's*** framework, makes conceptual sense as a value-added, pragmatic component tool for both scientists and nonscientists to apply *Sociological Safety* in researching and addressing problems at operational levels of human behavior.

Their horizontal-vertical distinctions reveal why psychological safety and sociological safety can operate as powerful complements rather than competing frameworks *when they play to their strengths*.

Psychology's *individual/horizontal* orientation excels at understanding how well individuals navigate personal safety concerns across contexts, how a person's *latent* risk perception, coping mechanisms, and safety behaviors manifest, and whether these occur at work, home, or in social settings. This cross-situational analysis helps identify consistent individual patterns and develop interventions that can be applied across various environments to help people "feel" safe, or "believe" they are safe.

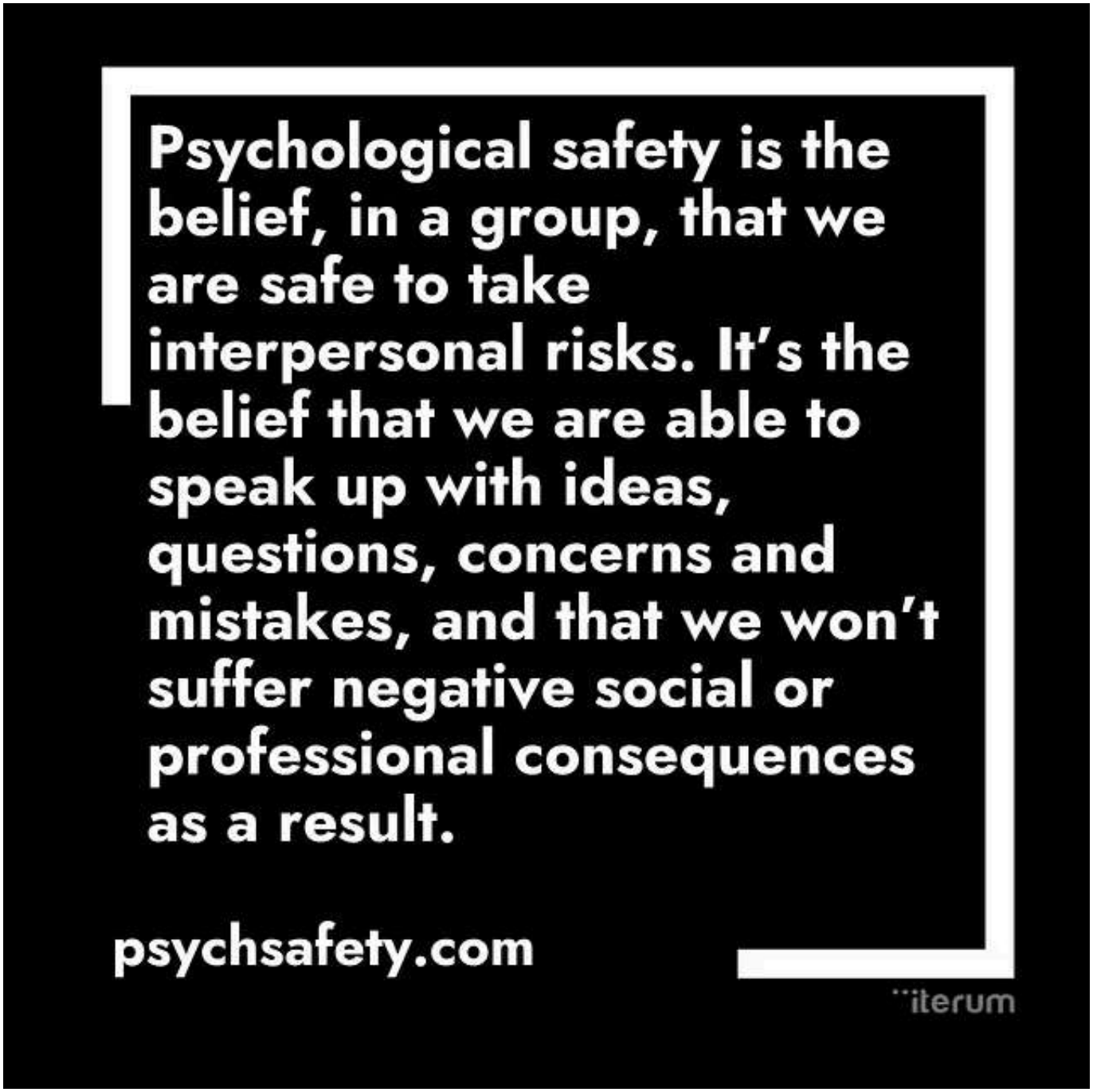


Image: by Tom Geraghty, Psychologist, psychsafety.com

However, this horizontal lens cannot adequately address why certain individuals systematically and systemically face greater safety risks regardless of their personal psychology, or why some organizational cultures persistently generate unsafe conditions despite individual-level safety training.

Sociology has both vertical and horizontal structures. But, it is sociology's *vertical/structural* orientation that adds an incrementally essential complementary contrast by tackling how structural sources and institutional arrangements simultaneously create differential safety outcomes at multiple levels of analysis. Where psychology examines *how* individuals mentally adapt to safety challenges across various contexts, a sociological approach investigates *why* safety dysfunctions exist in the first place.

Sociology explores how organizational structures can concentrate differing hazards and risk-generating activities at specific organizational strata, how educational institutions may perpetuate safety inequities across social classes, or how economic structures may systematically expose certain populations to greater risks. This vertical/structural analytical orientation reveals, for example, that many safety failures stem not from individual psychological deficits but from structural arrangements that no amount of horizontal, individual-focused intervention can address.

The integration of both orientations creates a comprehensive safety framework that addresses individual adaptation and resilience through psychological approaches. Together, they provide both the breadth and depth necessary to understand safety as simultaneously an embodied, personal "physiocognitive" experience and a socially constructed phenomenon.

From the grand to the granular, sociology bears the same structural and functional natures as any other field of human inquiry. A crucial similarity to those other disciplines and fields is that its discrete nature doesn't constitute epistemic independence or ontological completeness. The ongoing search for frameworks and models that consider the complex, dynamic, often nonlinear, and interacting nature of human behavior, as

explored in other fields of inquiry, has prompted the development of triadic and tripartite analytical frameworks explicitly incorporating a discrete sociological domain, from Tolman to Engels and others, over the past century. The Trivalent Safety Ecosystem, incorporating Sociological Safety®, is one of hopefully many more to come.

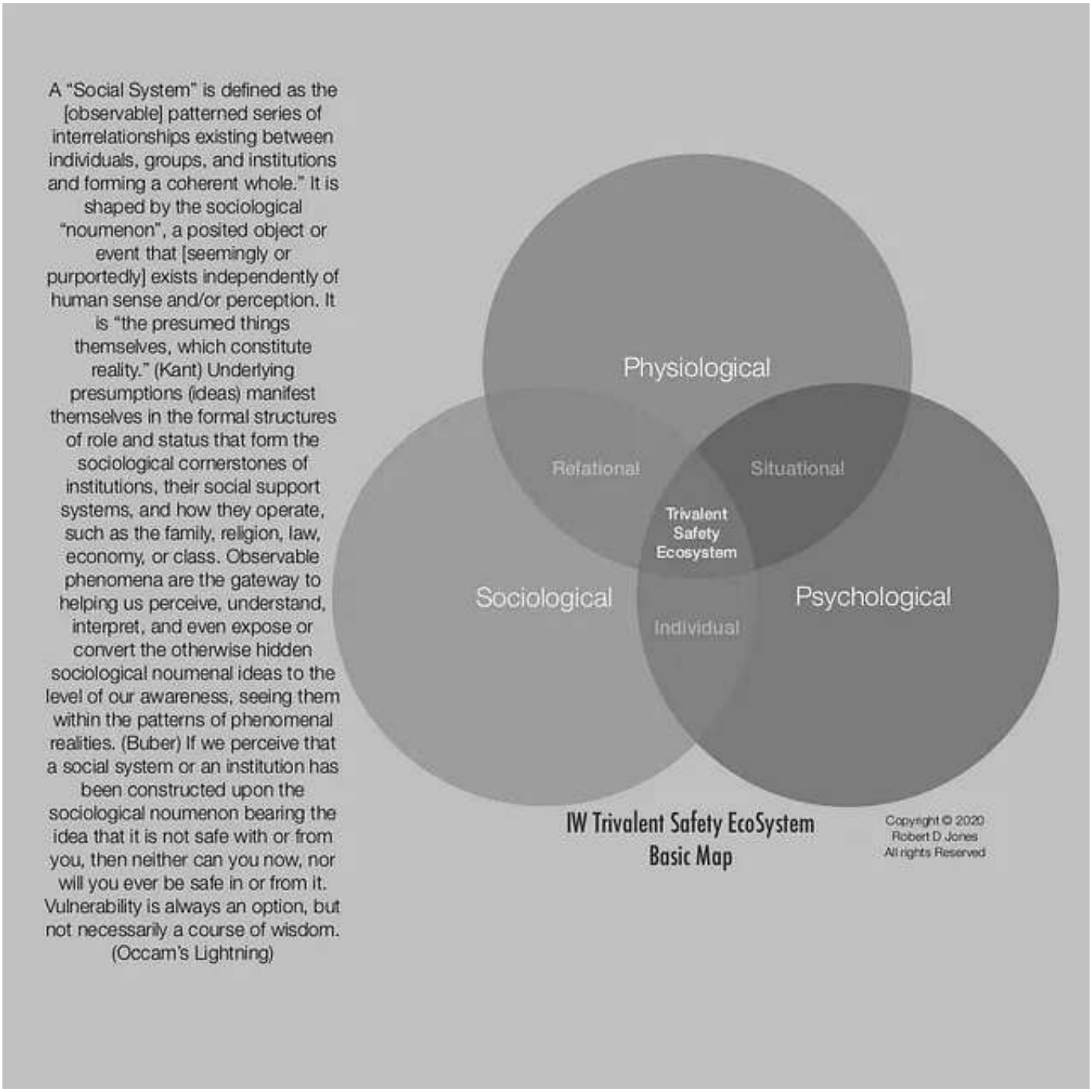


Fig. 7 — InclusiveWorks® Safety Ecosystem — A Basic Venn Cartograph*: The three domains are Tolman components, while the three piscis sections are Lewin's Field theory primary components. The central Reuleaux Triangle nexus is the convergence of both models and all components. The internal **RIS framework (Relational, Individual, Situational)** provides an operational lens for analyzing safety through observable

interactions between human dynamics, personal factors, and contextual variables in an integrated safety ecology. The Venn diagram is a **topological map** that visually defines the **location of integration** within the Life Space, emphasizing **flow and interdependence**.

Addressing workplace safety that isn't fundamentally psychological in nature needs to be expanded well beyond the narrow band of #psychologicalsafety to speak up on teams.

In the upcoming installments, we'll continue with the discussion of a few more aspects of the Trivalent Safety framework. Then, we'll describe the importance of three subsets (and/or liminal spaces) of relational, situational, and individual orientation states within a framework nexus that incorporates a sociological perspective, rather than strictly psychological/physiological perspectives. Following that, we'll move on to the benefits of starting with **safety** *as a crucial variable* in a much larger multivariate picture.

For non-subscribers of **SSI Thought Letter**, we return you to the special **Volume 1. Issue [X]** before moving to the next issue on "*Sociological Safety® in Representational Space.*"

Recommended Follow-Up Reading: TheSociologicalProblem.com
Share this article using: TrivalentSafety.com, a critical component of Trivalent Safety-III™ and the comprehensive Safety Ecosystem framework.

EPILOGUE:

- Though still an unmistakably Venn configuration, the "Venn Cartograph" is more like a map than the strict setmath usually associated with the Venn Diagram. In mapping, for example, a natural lake can be shown as

an entity within a jurisdictional city, then a county, each made distinct by borders, colors, legend, etc. That doesn't preclude or negate the lake's influential properties, enormous real and potential effects on the region, and its interactions with the city and region. "The map is not the territory" is a common way to understand the distinction between the structure of the lake and its surroundings. The map's vesical piscis lenses infer relational, individual, and situational (RIS) realities and the possibilities (effects) on the surrounding domain(s), and likewise for the primary domains themselves.

- I'll write more on this in "Venn Cartography and Kurt Lewin," coming soon.

Sociological Safety | Neuroscience | Diversity And Inclusion

Written by Rob Jones

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A career spanning public, private, and nonprofit sectors. High-level management experience across a range of activities in F-500 companies and Consulting/Coach.

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What are your thoughts?

Martijn Flinterman
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Good work, Rob. I like the way you position sociology next to psychology and physiology. It's an antidote to approaches like the classic one by Auguste Comte, who saw sociology as the mother of all sciences. As John Downer recently wrote, even a... more

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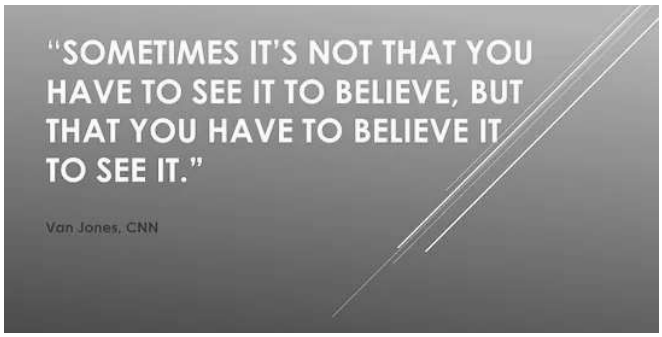

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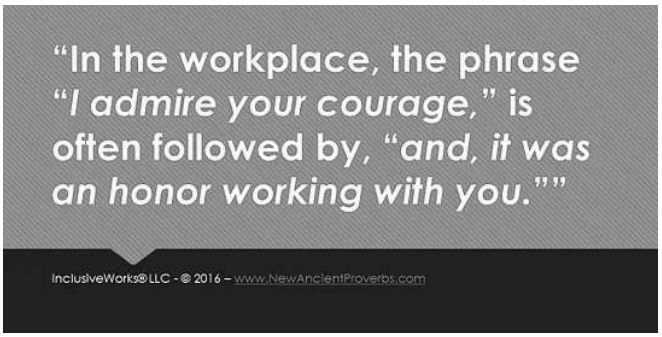

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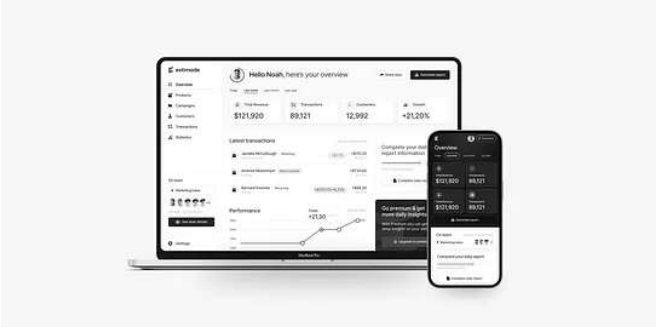

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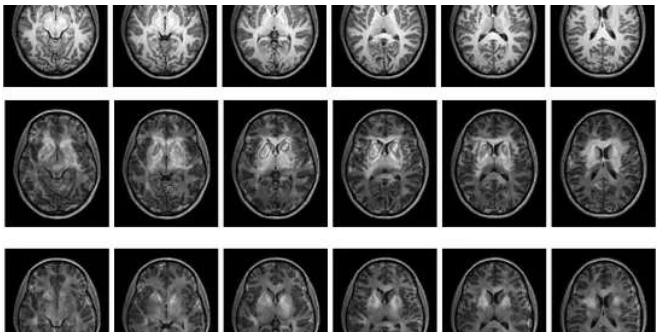

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